

21st Century Department Activities

The world in the 21st century is a very different place than just a hundred years ago and that cannot be more evident than in our schools. Our school systems are in transition, struggling to meet the changing needs of society while balancing the needs of the students. The departmental meeting must evolve into more than an avenue for bureaucratic deadlines. It must be a starting point for change by offering purposeful conversation among an interdisciplinary team about what works and what does not work for students that will ultimately lead to establishing a supportive, empowered, learning team. While the departmental meeting must look and function differently, it must remain true to the strong moral conviction that reflects back to the question, "What is best for the student?" The ultimate goal must first and foremost center upon improving student achievement.

The first step to reaching the goal of improved student achievement in the departmental meeting is to create a democratic process of education that corresponds with joint responsibility by identifying collective student needs. Why is Johnny failing? Schools do not improve without educators asking hard, concrete questions. Identifying a trend is not a method used to place blame, but is simply a means to reflect upon what is and what could be. In order to identify a starting point, review as a group various sources and forms of student data, such as state-based performance assessments, school-wide assessments, content specific, and/or school performance statistics to name a few in order to focus on a student need.

The second step is to recognize and embrace the philosophy that learning is cumulative and teaching is a lifelong pursuit. Teachers will need to embrace learning in order to change and improve student outcome. The departmental meeting is an arena to explore and change the elements of the learning environment as it reflects upon the identified area of student need. As a result, the second step must reveal what the teacher will study to become knowledgeable and skillful in order to meet those needs of the students.

Finally, the third step is to develop a collaborative group that functions as a research team in order to identify the strategies the group will use to master the new knowledge and skills learned. The team will research, plan, create, test, and assess the change process based upon student need. The following specific strategies that will enable the departmental meeting to evolve into an interdependent learning community will be explained here (Murphy & Lick, 2005).

- Examining student work
- Sharing observations of student work
- Providing professional development
- Researching action
- Studying lessons
- Co-mentoring
- Listening to and shadowing students

- Videotaping
- Developing curriculum
- Reading professional resources and academic content
- Creating journals and portfolios

Examining Student Work

A key strategy to identifying student need is to look at student-produced work. This strategy immediately asks teachers to step out of their comfort zone for a variety of reasons. The most obvious is that examining and critiquing is not a common practice and hits upon the workplace tradition of noninterference. Teachers naturally look at student work daily and possibly with the student and/or parents. However, the focus is usually limited to establishing a grade for the produced work. Specific student work and the overall implications of the work are usually never discussed with a colleague. In addition teachers may feel that examining student work is subjecting themselves to criticism or fault-finding, or that the student work examination is really to view the result of their teaching.

Examining student work is a basic element of collaboration and the acceptance of joint responsibility for student learning. It is the logical starting point to understanding student need. It is the student work that will support and generate the action plan for change. Researcher Megan Tschannen-Moran found that if collaboration is an "important mechanism" for finding solutions to problems, trust will be necessary for schools "to reap the benefits of greater collaboration" (Tschannen-Moran 2001, p.327). The use of protocols will help build trust, frame the discussion, and secure a safe avenue for growth with colleagues. Framing precise dialog with group-established protocols will take the focus and pressure off the teacher while offering supportive alternatives.

Specifically, a protocol is an agreed-upon set of guidelines that fosters purposeful conversation about teaching and learning. It provides a safe method for exchanging and asking challenging questions, allows the participants to practice active and reflective listening skills, manages the time, and creates an environment that fosters new or different perspectives that could enable new instructional or assessment approaches. The latter result is, of course, most important.¹

A member of the group will provide student work, teacher-made tests, rubrics, or anything that requires discussion or raises a question that reflects back to the area of student need identified earlier by the group. A facilitator will be designated to manage both the time and the focus of the group.

¹ More information at www.lasw.org/protocols.html or <http://scs.aed.org/rsw>

The basic models of a student work protocol will vary but should include:

1. Preparing or Focusing
 - a. A question, problem, or task is posed by the teacher/presenter and generated

- from the student-need topic
2. Presenting
 - a. Presenter explains the purpose of the material
 - b. Removes student names ♦ focus must remain on what can be learned from the work
 3. Analyzing and Responding
 - a. Group examine the material
 - b. Ask clarifying questions
 - c. Suggest what can be identified or learned from the examination concerning the students' performance
 - d. Respond directly to the question, problem, or task posed
 - e. Focus on positive comments that reflect the students' understanding
 - f. Presenter becomes an active listener
 - g. Group offer specific solutions or suggestions
 4. Reacting or Providing feedback
 - a. Presenter again moderates
 - b. Group listens
 - c. Presenting teacher offers feedback concerning the group responses (This is not a time to be defensive or feel a need to explain. It should be a time to think aloud about the original concern of the material and the process that was shared by the group.)
 5. Reflecting or Conversing
 - a. Group open dialog among all members
 - b. Brainstorm solutions
 6. Debriefing
 - a. Formulate action plan ♦ what will be done differently?

The group should keep the focus of the work on student achievement as well as teacher growth and support by identifying issues they see in the student work and by working together as a group to address the issue.

Sharing Observations of Students at Work

Observing students at work in a classroom is another tradition-breaking concept. Teachers usually are not comfortable with inviting other teachers into their isolated worlds. It's a scary and possibly intimidating thing to say, "Come on in and tell me what you see." It requires the need for mutual respect and trust within the group setting which only truly comes as a result of talking, working, and learning together. The real difference here is that the observation is based upon a shared collaboratively developed lesson based upon student need. The true focus of the observation is how the student is responding to the instruction. While the whole group has collaboratively developed the lesson for the student observations members will pair with a partner to share the observation duties. The whole process can be managed with group-established norms that reflect exactly how the observation will be handled and may include some of the following (Murphy & Lick, 2005):

- Observation is focused on student response to instruction and upon student need
- Specific required data is identified
- Data is used for ongoing intervention
- Information is shared only with group members
- Since it is a collaboratively developed lesson ♦ observation needs to be only 10 minutes in length
- Purpose is to observe student reaction
- Observations should be used monthly as an ongoing data-collection system
- Gathered data should be entered into specific observation log

Providing Professional Development

The departmental meeting is a perfect avenue for professional development based upon hearing the expert voice. The expert voice references both the critically acclaimed expert in the field, which may include an author, college professor, researcher and/or trainer as well as colleagues who are considered experts in their work. The expert voice may take on many facets and be reflected in a variety of ways but must always reflect the principle that the "work is public" which means that teachers need to be encouraged to share the good, the not-so good, and their failures even when it may be uncomfortable. It is through the sharing that collaborative learning develops. It should also be recognized that professional development in a departmental meeting is not a "sit and get" process but an actively engaged pursuit, where learning can be applied in the classroom. The expert voice should include but not be limited to the following (Murphy & Lick, 2005):

- Group invites guest speaker
 - Outside school faculty
 - Member of school faculty
 - Connect with a resource person for ongoing support
- Training is ongoing for area of need
- Group take a course together off-campus
- One member takes a course off-campus and then shares the resources with the group who then develop and practice the application of the new information

Researching Action

The departmental group meetings will be by the very nature of design, a research team. The ultimate goal of the meetings is to improve student achievement, and that requires research. The first step of action research requires the use of data for decision-making instruction, which for many is not a familiar or routine practice. It's impossible to plan ahead if you don't know where you are beginning. Using data is the logical first step but until lately, very limited in its use, especially by the classroom teacher who is dealing with time restraints and/or lack of experience in data analysis. In certain incidences, data has also received a bad reputation because of its purpose of placing blame in the past.

Data should be used to recognize a need and then used to establish an instructional plan for meeting that need. It is the catalyst that forces reflection, growth, and change. Often the data reveals information that was simply not available or not accurate until made visual.

Action research should look like a continuous cycle of the following steps (Murphy & Lick, 2005):

- Establish baseline data
- Review current research that addresses the student need
- Develop lesson
- Evaluate student work as a result of the lesson
- Re-evaluate classroom data to determine whether the need has been met
- Repeat cycle either by revisiting a need or by identifying a different need
 - Repeating cycle of Plan-Act-Reflect

Studying Lessons

The difference between lesson planning and lesson study is that lesson study is a collaborative effort and focuses on what the group want the student to do (Richardson 2004). Richardson stated that in a lesson study the group develops the lesson. While one member teaches the lesson, the others observe the students responding. Reflection and revision are part of the debriefing that follows.

Use the following steps to conduct a lesson study in the departmental meeting (Murphy & Lick, 2005):

- Focus of lesson will be based on the identified student need
- Plan for the lesson (This may take a month if meeting weekly.)
 - Research
 - Assess current knowledge
 - Estimate student response
- Prepare for the lesson observation
 - Create norms for observations
 - Design specific recording material
- Teach and observe the lesson
 - Observe how students construct understanding
 - Devise methods for problem solving
- Debrief the lesson
- Reflect and plan ♦ group may decide to revise and re-teach or apply their knowledge to a new area

Co-mentoring

The simple fact is that all people regardless of their age or experience have something to offer if we only stop and listen. The other simple fact is that for many, asking for or accepting feedback or help is viewed as a weakness, a negative image that creates tension, anxiety, and resistance. Still another consideration that could explain the resistant factor to mentoring is the belief that what an observer sees or hears in your classroom could be turned against you in the form of administrative spying. To reiterate the purpose of the group, improving student achievement can only be accomplished when we focus on what can be changed for improvement instead of placing blame. Co-mentors among the department group decide when and how to offer assistance whether it is to plan together, teach lessons, demonstrate effective practices or serve as coaches. Regardless of the involvement level, the atmosphere must be one of trust and support for the good of the student.

Listening to and Shadowing Students

Students themselves are probably the most under-utilized resource for school improvement. Students are stakeholders and when asked, can provide valuable information about school climate, instruction, and classroom structure, which can help shape and identify student needs. When students are provided a voice and realize that that voice is heard, it empowers them to take ownership in the school improvement plan. Various methods exist for activating student voices whether it is a select group of students or the whole school being interviewed or surveyed. Involving students also forces the group into more of an action mode. The departmental group should decide exactly what they want to learn from an interview or survey as it reflects the student needs that have been identified.

As the expression, "walk a day in my shoes," implies there is no quicker way to learn what is working and what is not in the real world than actually walking the walk, in this situation, shadowing the student.

As with the other suggested activities, the beginning focus should be student needs. From there, participants can further identify what exactly will be the subject target while shadowing. For example, perhaps effective communication skills are the group focus, so the activity should be to observe and document where and when students use those skills. A variation of the student shadowing is "Data in a Day" which incorporates educators from outside the school, students, and community members to review a predetermined focus point or student need. An adult and student are paired up to observe informally and document specific instances that exemplify the focal point.

Whatever method is used, the most valuable component of the shadowing procedure is compiling and analyzing the information in order to get a clear view of the whole system by viewing individual parts. An issue may arise when students, teachers, or both are reluctant to permit the observing process due to the fact that a taboo is, once again, being broken. In order to ensure cooperation, concern will need to be expressed that this step in the process is not a fault-finding mission but one in which potential growth and school improvement is the goal.

Videotaping

As the group develops and implements intervention methods for meeting the student needs, videotaping a lesson may add new insight into the process. As has been the case, the focus is on student response during the lesson. The teacher videotapes the student learning, evaluates the effectiveness of the lesson based upon the student response and uses it as a tool for improving instruction. The procedure is as follows (Murphy & Lick, 2005):

- Teacher from the group videotapes a lesson that addresses the focal point
- The actual videotaping should be recording student responses
- Reviews the lesson in private
 - Makes notes of positive elements
 - Lists areas for change
- Erases the tape
- Discusses the information with the group
- Process repeated by other members of group
- May share and critique tape (if comfortable) with group

Developing Curriculum

While the department meetings will not be responsible for writing the curriculum, it can be a systematic component of the curriculum-writing process. Because the departmental meeting focus is consistently on student need, when the curriculum is to be revised, the departmental groups should be involved. They would be the best vehicle to assist the curriculum committee in identifying student need, searching for best practices and materials, applying materials and strategies, and then assessing the results of the instruction.

Reading Professional Resources and Academic Content

Teachers need to be experts in their fields in order to stimulate and expand student knowledge. As a result, teachers need to immerse themselves in their academic content area and best-practice strategies. Teachers, during the meetings, can expand and enrich their expertise by talking with each other to gain understanding, and searching for new ways to apply knowledge or enable more effective teaching. Experience is the best teacher, and case studies illustrate elements of the school improvement process that worked and those that did not. Research and review case studies that support, encourage, and offer suggestions for the continuing development of the learning community.

Professional readings are a generally accepted practice of all professions, and education is no exception, whether they are in the form of books or articles. The department meetings are a perfect avenue for sharing and learning about the ever-changing teaching profession.

The group decides which resources to read to enhance the knowledge of the identified student need. They then follow this pattern:

- Identify resources to read
 - All participants do not need to read the same material ♦ numerous methods for shared or group readings
- Debrief
- Act on the new information by implementing the technique
- Respond or reflect
- Begin cycle again
 - Plan-Act-Reflect

Creating Journals and Keeping Portfolios

Writing a journal is an excellent technique for documenting change. It is highly encouraged as a means not only to document the process of school improvement, but also to track the impact on student learning. A reflective journal can also provide an outlet for personal release of frustrations, anxieties, joys, and successes of a new initiative.

Portfolios are an excellent tool for reflecting upon the process, the struggles, and the successes of the departmental meetings, especially since change (student achievement) is the cornerstone of the meetings. The group and/or individuals may decide to maintain a portfolio as a tool to document the professional growth. Regardless, it can become a powerful tool for growth that then can be shared at the end of the year or used as a resource for the following year.

Departments Collaborating

Each interdisciplinary departmental group is unique and holds great potential but only if acted upon in the classroom and if the knowledge learned is shared within the organization ♦ specifically among the departments. The vital link to moving from a collaborating department team to a learning organization is effective communication. Good communication not only shares information but encourages trust among the organization because all stakeholders know what is happening in the departmental meetings. No hidden secretive agenda exists; everything from the department meeting is open for public examination and use.

Suggestions for effective communication among departments include (Murphy & Lick 2005):

- On a rotating basis, one member of the departmental group shares the group process and progress with other departmental groups, usually every 4-6 weeks.
- Highlights of departmental meetings will be added to the agenda for grade-level, team, and/or whole faculty meetings.

- Institute whole-faculty sharing, usually twice a year ♦ to celebrate the work.
- Share with board members, district leaders, parents, students, and the general public. Sharing with students, parents, and community members models the life-long learning process in action.
- Post in a public place an electronically written documentation of the meeting process, action, and progress.
- Share new resources, instructional techniques or post questions at a faculty website.
- Showcase what works ♦ invite observations
- Provide for newsletters for faculty, home, and community.
- Create brochures to illustrate helpful findings.
- Present exhibits and seminars of departmental meeting results during open house, PTA meetings, or parent/ teacher conferences.
- Create bulletin boards to share successes or tips.

Challenges, Barriers, and Tips

Any type of change is often viewed with skepticism because the immediate question is always, "How will this affect me?" Skepticism is relative to the opening question of, "What is best for the students?" Viewed by an educator, the two questions are intertwined, and in the process of providing what is best for the students, the educator will inevitably be changed. As with most change, people are asked to move into areas that have traditionally not been opened. In initiating the process, working slowly is good in a way that offers support, guidance, and learning to change. Working together in steps provides no surprises as to expectations except in what group efforts provide in student understanding and school improvement.

The changes in the departmental meeting must be supported by all stakeholders, including the school board, central office, superintendent, principal, and faculty. It must be recognized that while the collaboration is valuable, the true value of the collaboration is when it results in student achievement. While the departmental meetings can establish a shared leadership role, the department chairs, principals, and/or district leaders will be central for success. The department chairs, principal, and/or district leaders will not only be initiators and implementers but will also provide sources of continual support by making connections with teachers about the specifics of the group process, the progress of the groups, and maintaining the idea that the groups must keep on target.

Time during the workday must be found and allocated for department meetings and must be a top priority supported from all levels of administration and the community. The idea of time for professional development and collaboration is usually rare, but it is a vital component for success. Teachers need time to talk about their work with other teachers. This is a non-negotiable component. It is that important that days and weeks should be restructured to accommodate the needs of the student. This first step begins with providing teachers time for collaboration.

Finally, everyone on the professional staff has to be involved and focused on school improvement and student achievement; there is no room for exceptions. Many teachers may not value collaboration with colleagues for a number of reasons suggested earlier in this article, but the quick and constant message from the administration must be that this how business is done in the school, and all teachers are expected to participate if employed there. Change is difficult but the goal of building a team of learners that will transform the school into a community of learners is noble.

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